

Motorists weigh alternatives

By Joey Airdo, Independent Newspapers

June 21, 2007

Arizona Department of Transportation crews began a face-lift of Interstate 17 last month but officials are already looking toward future possibilities as the Valley's population expands.

Residents along I-17's corridor shared their perspectives about freeway alternatives, including about 30 Northwest Valley residents who attended a June 6 meeting at Boulder Creek High School, 40404 N. Gavilan Peak Parkway.

ADOT officials hosted three other public meetings in Camp Verde, Flagstaff and Prescott Valley for input about the need for a traffic alternative, as well as potential corridor suggestions.

Discussing possibilities

ADOT Transportation Planning Division spokesman Dale Buskirk said at the June 6 meeting the State Transportation Board requested a study of I-17 alternatives.

"The corridor linking Phoenix and Flagstaff is one of the major corridors in the state," he explained.

ADOT crews are working on improvements to the freeway's segment between Loop 101 and New River Road. The project includes new traffic interchanges at Jomax Road, Dixileta Drive, Lone Mountain Road and Dove Valley Road; updated interchanges at Deer Valley Road and Carefree Highway; and new general purpose and high-occupancy vehicle lanes along the roadway.

"We feel that as the state continues to grow and our ability to widen I-17 is limited by physical, topographical and environmental factors, we may need to develop an alternative to I-17," Mr. Buskirk added.

He explained the "Interstate 17 Alternatives Study" is in its preliminary phase and officials hope it will help determine the need for a freeway alternative and potential corridors.



Arizona Department of Transportation Public Involvement Consultants Steve Roman and Peggy Fiandaca, as well as ADOT Planning Team Member Jessica Hernandez answer North Valley residents' questions about the "Interstate 17 Alternatives Study." Department officials held a series of public meetings May 31-June 6 to gather input.

Independent Newspapers/Joey Airdo

In addition to a number of possible routes in the far north portion of the state, ADOT officials identified two corridor alternatives connecting Phoenix with the high country.

One of the routes extends off State Route 51 at Loop 101, continues north and eventually merges with I-17 east of Dewey and Humboldt. The other route picks up at the future Loop 303 highway at Carefree Highway, parallels I-17 and branches out to other potential alternatives east of Dewey and Humboldt.

Residents' perspectives

Residents residing in neighborhoods along the freeway's corridor agreed an alternative to I-17 would be a welcomed improvement.

Park Meadows Neighborhood Association spokeswoman Carol Simpkins avoids traveling on the freeway.

"It's so congested," she said. "It starts at Bell Road and you can't get any farther."

Ms. Simpkins added Loop 101 is not any better, noting many motorists are trying to merge onto I-17. She blamed most of the problems on poor planning before Anthem's development.

"I don't think Anthem should have been allowed to build and flourish like they did unless they would have taken care of other ways to travel," Ms. Simpkins explained. "They made a lot of money building out there but they sure made a lot of congestion without paying for anything to be done."

Anthem resident Tom Setter agreed. He did not attend the June 6 meeting but submitted comments on the study via a form on ADOT's Web site, www.azdot.gov.

"I've never been able to figure out why they let Anthem be built ... and not have widened that road before," Mr. Setter noted.

Ms. Simpkins said traffic on I-17 is particularly dreary on holidays.

Tramonto resident Rick Robinson agreed.

"A majority of the backup tends to occur between Loop 101 and Black Canyon City," he explained.

Stetson Hills resident Neil Brooks, a real estate agent, travels north on a regular basis because he has a number of home listings along Carefree Highway and in Anthem and New River. He acknowledged I-17 is congested after 2:30 p.m. on weekdays and all day on weekends.

Mr. Brooks avoids the freeway by traveling along Norterra Parkway from Happy Valley Road to Carefree Highway.

“You can see on the overpass if its crowded and that’s when I take one of the alternative routes,” he noted.

Ms. Simpkins knows motorists who travel to the Northeast Valley to Scottsdale or Cave Creek roads to access the northern portions of the Valley. Motorists can also travel to New River via Lake Pleasant Road, which starts at 99th Avenue and Beardsley Road and turns into New River Road at Carefree Highway.

New River/Desert Hills Community Association Vice President Terry Marron described the State Route 51 extension option as a nightmare. He thinks the Loop 303 extension option makes more sense.

“I wouldn’t say it would be better than it is right now, but as everything grows in the future, it won’t get worse,” said Mr. Marron, noting truck traffic adds to I-17’s congestion.

He added the State Route 51 extension option would “tear up the rural nature of New River and Desert Hills.”

Mr. Setter and Tramonto resident Cindi Giannantoni also prefer the Loop 303 extension option.

Ms. Giannantoni, a former Cave Creek resident, worries the State Route 51 extension option would destroy the beauty of the Northeast Valley.

ADOT spokesman Doug Nintzel said the proposed alternative routes do not represent exact alignments.

“These are potential corridors our study team was able to develop without a technical analysis yet,” he explained.

Ms. Simpkins said a light rail system would benefit citizens hoping to travel from Phoenix to the northern portion of the state. However, she acknowledged it would require an extremely long wait and a lot of money.

Mr. Robinson does not believe a light rail system is a viable option due to the terrain.

Mr. Marron joked he anticipated seeing an I-17 alternative by 2050.

Looking forward

Mr. Nintzel warned the study will not come together overnight.

“It’s important that folks understand this is an initial stage in the process,” he explained. “One of the decisions that needs to be made is whether to proceed onto further study. It will be interesting to see what the technical analysis turns up as we look toward having a study report done.”

A committee will identify corridor locations and alternatives as well as conduct an environmental scan and forecast travel demand throughout the summer. In the latter half of this year, members will develop cost estimates and identify funding alternatives.

Another series of public meetings is slated for December. Next year, the committee will prepare a report with recommendations.

Post your opinions in the Public Issues forums at www.newszap.com.

News Editor Joey Airdo can be reached at jairdo@newszap.com.